

ADYAR PAMPHLETS

No. 108

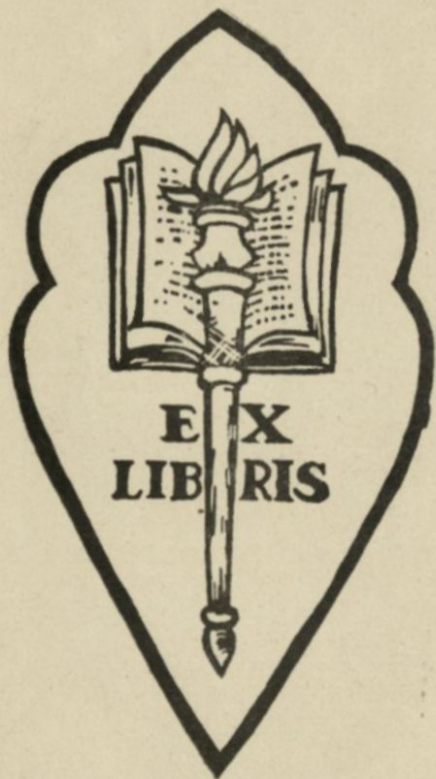
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Life, and Life After Death

BY

ANNIE BESANT

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Life, and Life after Death¹

YOUR HIGHNESS, BROTHERS AND FRIENDS,

“What hast thou to do with wealth? What hast thou to do with relatives? What hast thou to do with wife? O thou that shalt surely die. Seek the Atman, that which is hidden in the cave. Where is gone thy father, and the fathers of thy father?” This was the question put by the great saint Vyāsa to Shuka, and it is a question that men have asked themselves, and asked each other, century after century, as long as man has been born, and has died. What is the use to us—a man asks himself—of all the pleasures of life? What is the use of all that luxury can give? What is the use of all power and of all fame, if all these things have ending, if they are snatched from our hand by death? So man in all times and all ages has asked: What is Birth, and what is Death? We come into the world, and out of the world we pass again. We are here for a time, but everything is subject to change. We find all that we value slip out of our hands, that on which our heart fixes itself is taken away from us by death. The time comes when we ourselves must die. Among all the uncertainties

¹ A lecture delivered at the Palace Hall of H. H. the Mahārājāh Sāhib of Faridkot, Panjab.

in the world—among all these—there is but one thing certain—Death. As Shri Kṛṣṇa said : “ Certain is death to the born.” If we find ourselves in the world, we know we shall pass out of it. We do not know the time at which we shall pass out of it, the time at which we shall die. We do not know the age at which we shall die. But that death shall come one day, of that there is no shadow, no possibility, of doubt.

For the most part man turns away his eyes from this sure fact. For the most part man prefers not to think of it, not to allow it to intrude upon his moments of pleasure and happiness. For the most part he tries to keep it out of sight, for he does not want his life to be shadowed by the shadow of death. But now and then there comes a time when he cannot turn his eyes from it, when death forces itself on his attention, when death thrusts himself into the home, and touches the nearest in the family. Then man, despite himself, thinks of death ; then, despite himself, he asks : “ What is life worth, if life is not secure ? ”

Then there arises in him some touch of that Vairāgya, as it is called, that disgust with life, which turns aside from life's pleasures with weariness of all that is changing ; and desire arises in him for the changeless, the eternal, for that which can never pass away, for that which can never disappoint.

But this Vairāgya is of a very passive kind. It touches a man when death has forced itself on him in this way. In course of time such Vairāgya disappears.

It is not born out of the real hunger of the soul, but out of temporary disgust, of disappointment with life. The true Vairāgya that lasts, and tends to wisdom, is the hunger of the soul for the Self, the aspiration of the Jīvātman for the Paramātman ; that hunger, once really felt, never again passes away, for it has root in the man's deepest nature. He yearns to find himself the Self of all.

The Vairāgya that comes in truth from outside—which is the result of disappointment with worldly things rather than of the deep feeling in man for the supreme Self—being born of disappointment, often disappears as disappointment loses its horror. But still, even from that, when it is present, great and important lessons of life may be learned, ere the life regains its savour, and when the beauty of the world is overshadowed for a moment by a cloud. But when the passing cloud is gone, it again regains its brightness, so that men should take advantage of the time when the trouble touches them. When friends and relatives are snatched away by death from amongst them, they should take advantage of that, and try to learn some lessons that may be useful.

Man asks himself then : What is life, and what is death ? Can we know anything about them and of the other side of death ? Of this we are fairly certain, that not all dies when the body perishes. We shall not really perish when the body falls away ; but what is there on the other side of death ? When the body is struck away by death's hands, what conditions shall we pass into, in what worlds shall we find

ourselves? What are the things on this earth which we find in our condition there? Is there anyone in the world who can tell us anything certain of the life on the other side of death? Is there anyone in the world who can tell us, of his own experience, what is the condition of those who leave the body? What brings them back again to the world? What governs their rebirth into the physical, material world? What is the circle of Birth and Death? What the wheel, as it is called—the wheel of births and deaths—to which we are tied, from which we cannot escape, which turns round, round and round, carrying us all with it into some other world, and so out of that again to reach other worlds? There are three worlds through which we turn. This wheel carries all Births and Deaths. What is the force which has bound Birth and Death in varying succession? Is it possible to escape from that wheel of births and deaths? Can we break the bonds, so that we shall not afterwards be born again? Is there not some permanent state into which we may pass, where we may find satisfaction and complete peace which shall never be troubled, and joy which shall never be ended?

That is the question ever repeated by the soul in man. It is that question which we are trying in some way to answer in our thought to-night, and see whether the teaching of the sages of the past will solve it. We reply to it by the knowledge of those who have studied the great truths of to-day as the sages teach them. We seek some certainty as to the conditions under which a man is continually

born and continually dies, and also as to the conditions by which a man can be free from death and birth, and pass into the peace that knows no change, that knows no ending.

Let us take the first part of the question—the succession of birth and death. That is the question, we may say, of most pressing importance to most of us, because we are not yet for the most part prepared to pass out of the circle of births and deaths. Much must be done before we attain full freedom, and most of us have to be born several times again before we can pass into the eternal liberty. But to know the road which we shall ultimately take is something, to know what must be done if we wish to escape from the bondage.

I just mentioned the three worlds man passes through in going from birth to death and death to birth. Let us take the first, the physical. As to this, we need not dwell long on it. We are fairly familiar with its conditions, but there is one fact it is well to notice, because it is this fact that drifts us into that from which we are trying to escape. We are seeking for happiness. That, if you come to look at it, is the one object of man's life. He is always trying to be happy; nothing else will satisfy him, nothing else will content him. If he grasps at a thing, and does not find happiness in it, he will say: "Well, I have made a mistake—I have gone the wrong way, in looking for happiness. Let me try and find the better road." He always comes back and back again to the idea that he must be happy. Nothing else will give his mind

any kind of satisfaction. This is natural ; the craving of the heart for happiness is God-given. Īshvara makes us long for happiness, because it is by that longing we shall at last find rest in Him. We try to find happiness in physical things ; that is the universal experience. The body makes so many claims upon us when it is not satisfied ; the body is greedy and grasping. It has a craving for food and for drink, for the enjoyment of sexual pleasures, and so on. The body tries always to get hold of something. The first place in which man tries to find happiness is the body. That makes the most forcible claim upon his attention. Now he does not understand the fact that this craving will pass away, and disappear after a time. He gives way to it. When he has a great craving for food he will yield to taking too much. He is greedy, and takes too much. When he is eager for sexual pleasures, he will take too much. What is the result ? Disgust, sickness, diseases of all kinds. This is how Īshvara teaches him that man's happiness does not lie in satisfying the greedy desires and expectations of the body. The gratifying of the body results in making it more greedy. The more he drinks, the more he craves for drink. The more he eats, the more he wants food. The more of sexual pleasures he enjoys, the greater his passion becomes. It is written that it is easier to put out fire by pouring butter over it, than to extinguish passion by gratifying it. Happiness never lies in that way, and Īshvara tells us : " Your happiness does not lie in the body ; if you seek it there, then you will be continually

disappointed, and you will reach surfeit but not pleasure."

Then the man tries to find that which shall give him longer happiness and steadier happiness in intellectual delights. But sometimes, under the rush of trouble and sorrow, the intellect loses its charm, and he is no longer able to give his mind to study. Or if he is strong—strong enough to study in spite of trouble—there comes old age, when the brain is dull and begins to fail, and he is no longer able to think properly and clearly. Then the intellectual happiness finds an ending, although far better than that of the body is the pleasure that he has found in the mind.

In all directions man is thus beaten back. Naturally at last he seeks to find pleasure, happiness, in the Self, in the Supreme. That alone knows no disgust, and that alone knows no weariness and no disappointment. There only, is to be found happiness beyond the touch of passion and craving. He finds there the Self in oneness with the Supreme, and shares the blessings of the life which flows from Him, and love.

But let us follow a man through death, who during life has chiefly sought enjoyment for the body. When death strikes away the body, he can no longer use it as an instrument for his enjoyment. Let me tell you exactly how man passes on to the other side of death. We will take two examples: one of a man who finds all his pleasures in the body, and the other of a man who is sober and temperate with the body, and finds greater pleasure in the exercise of the emotions, in the gratification of the intellect. What will be the

state of those two very different men on the other side of death ?

There are two worlds into which they both pass and through which they must pass, but the condition of each man in these two worlds will be exceedingly different. One takes with him the passions gratified in the body, and passes out of the body. He is unconscious at first, and is fast asleep and unconscious for a short time after death. He awakens, and finds himself in what is called *Preṭa Loka*—the world of those who have passed away, sometimes called *Kāma Loka*, or the world of desire. When he awakens, the first thing he is conscious of is that his desires, which he has so much nourished in the body in life, are very much alive, and are asking for their usual gratifications. If the man is very fond of eating and drinking or of enjoying women, these desires arise when the soul awakens after death, and though he then has a body, it is a body which is quite useless so far as gratification of desire is concerned. This body is sometimes called the strong body, and it really imprisons the *Jīvātman*. He is kept therein as a prisoner is kept in jail; and the prison-house which keeps him prisoner is made of the passions and appetites which he ever nourished in his physical life, which he was continually gratifying and so making very vigorous. These passions do not really belong to your physical body. The physical body is only an instrument whereby they are gratified. Passions are not in the outer body, but they are in the inner, which is the

body of desires. It is there that all passions have their roots and their centres, and they use the physical body as the instrument of gratification. There are the Karmendriyas, they are the organs by which all the passions are gratified, the organs by which the cravings are fed. The physical life is always feeding the senses.

Thus the senses of such a man are very strong on the other side of death, and imprison him, so that the Jīvātman is very strongly confined. He craves for the gratifications which he has been enjoying in the physical world, and the absence of these makes him very unhappy on the other side of death. For the gratifications that he is desiring belong to this world, and on the other side of death he cannot have them. Hence he suffers under strong sense cravings which he is unable to satisfy.

This is the condition in which a man is on the other side of death, when he has continually been gratifying his wishes, his passions, and when at last the body, which is the only means of that gratification, is struck away. He is just as a starving man tied to a very strong post and a plate of food put in front of him; he cannot reach it because he is tied. This greedy, craving, unhappy condition, is the condition into which man passes after death, when he has spent his physical life in the enjoyment of the senses. The senses remain, but the means of their gratification have been struck away. So that death takes away the body, but all the senses remain. If a man realises this—a man who has a sensible will—he will

not allow himself to make the conditions for this unhappiness on the other side of death. In this life you do not take poison merely because it is sweet. You would not be silly enough to take it. You would say : " No, I am not going to take a thing that will give me serious agony afterwards." Then why make passions strong, since they will only torment you when you pass through death ? You must starve them, because you cannot get this gratification.

Over and over again, speaking to people, I have told them these facts. I do not know them simply because I have read of them in sacred books, but because I am able to see them, as I have been taught to do. It is sad to see people thus suffering, and naturally one feels pity and sorrow that one is not able to do much to relieve them from the karma that they have manufactured for themselves. Those who have yielded to the senses suffer thus on the other side of death because they have yielded. Some amount of help can be given to those in Preṭa Loka by those who are in the body, and the Shrāddha which you are taught to perform, is one way to help on the other side, to help to free the man so that he may pass on to Svarga. In the Shrāddha are mantras to be recited, and the use of these words is this : all sounds set up vibrations in the air, and the vibrations force the subtle matter to swing backwards and forwards. The vibrations come against the body, and help that body to become broken into pieces.

Let me tell you a similar thing in the physical world. If you have a number of soldiers marching

in order, as they take step after step together it causes vibrations, and if the soldiers are taken over a bridge which is not a very strong one, I dare say that you know the commander will tell them to fall out of step, and go over it walking irregularly. Why? Because if they all keep step together regularly, there is a great danger that the bridge may break into pieces. These vibrations that are made by keeping step regularly are very strong, and may break the thing against which they come.

The mantras set up strong, regular vibrations, which come against the body that imprisons the Jīvātman, and help to break it. That is why the Shrāddha ceremony is performed and why mantras are recited. But you should try to be very careful how it is done. The priest should be learned, and pure in life, otherwise he has very little power which he can give to the mantras. The man who is ignorant, who is illiterate, who is impure, he has very little force which he can throw into the recitation of the mantras, so that when the Shrāddha is performed, if there be an ignorant priest, the Shrāddha is comparatively of little use. If there be a learned and pure priest, then you are doing a good and great service to your friends and your relatives on the other side of death. It will help to set them free from the prison in which they are living.

Now look at the man who has *not* given way to bodily passions during his physical life, and who passes to Preta Loka or Kāma Loka. What happens

to him? He has exhausted his passions by conquering them before death; he has made them weak. The consequence is this: there is very little material with which to build up this prison-house. Just as you cannot build a house without bricks and without earth, so the prison-house on the other side of death cannot be built up, if you do not give materials of passions with which to build it. The result is that when the man who has not given way to the passions passes out of the body, on the other side of death there is a very pure subtle body which can easily be broken through, and he passes very quickly on to the pure world. He passes swiftly through Preta Loka. He is not held there. He does not suffer there. He has made a body that helps him instead of dragging him back, and he goes on happily and easily, without any trouble and sorrow, and finds full consciousness in Svarga, the land of happiness, in the company of the gods.

Now comes in the great use of the intellect. The man who has cultivated the intellect and who has cultivated the finer emotions, and has done a great deal of good to the people round him, who has been kind, gentle and just, finds all his good deeds, good thoughts and good feelings awaiting him. All these come round him and make him a beautiful body, in which he enjoys all the happiness of the heavenly world. All his merits, the good actions, good desires, and good thoughts of his past life, make up his Svarga body, in which he is able to enjoy all the delights of the heavenly world.

This is the kind of body you should be building now, in order that on the other side of death you may find it ready for you to carry you on. You make that body by good desires, by wishing to do right, by noble aspirations, by trying to do good, by good thoughts. You don't know how strong thought is; every time you think of a good thing, you create a beautiful form which remains near you in life, and helps you to walk along the Path of Right Action. Every day of your life you should give a little time to good thoughts. When you get up in the morning, after you have worshipped, then think of good things, think good thoughts. Give a little time to think of what is pure and holy.

You will thus build a body which will wait for you on the other side of death, and will take you to Svarga. You should fix some strong, good thoughts by daily meditation; then, when the moment of death comes upon you, these good thoughts will carry you to the world to which they belong. It is said in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* by Shri Kṛṣṇa that the man after death goes to the world of the thought that he thinks when he dies. In the heavenly body you live as long as the body that you have made will last. The more good you have put into it, the longer will be your heavenly life in the heavenly world. Again, the law gives you just what you have here built up.

Sages have always taught that sacrifice wins Svarga. That is literally true. Let a man sacrifice, and by his sacrifice he will win the joy of Svarga. Everything that a man gives in sacrifice comes back

to him. A man gives money here for a jewel, gives money for land, for palaces, for all objects of luxury, and he does not grudge what he gives for these. These things all give pleasure for some moments, but when the pleasure is over, it is gone, nothing remains. But man grudges every gift he gives to God. The Gods ask him to make sacrifices to them : they ask for such gifts as make life happier for others—the digging of wells, the planting of trees, the doing of of all things that benefit other people ; and then the Gods, who are just, give him back his gifts in the heavenly life. If man gives more in sacrifice, his heavenly life will be longer and happier.

It is the law that a man must be born where the things are that he desires. It is written in one of the Upaniṣhads that man by his desires is carried to one world or another world. Now most of man's desires belong to this world, the material physical world. Hence he quickly comes back to it. He is born again comparatively soon.

Three things govern rebirth—his actions in his previous birth, his desires in his previous birth, his thoughts in his previous birth. I have told you how these work out in Kāma Loka and Svarga. A part of these has thus been worked out in these two worlds. The part remaining governs his rebirth.

When he is reborn, a man's thoughts build up the character with which he is born again into the world. You know how different characters are at birth. There are two little children born with two very different characters. One child you will find very

greedy, and the other unselfish. The one child very passionate and angry, and the other gentle. One child loving and sympathetic, the other cold and indifferent. They are so different, although but little children. These are the characters that they made in their past lives.

You know how much a man's happiness in the world depends on his character. If a man is not upright, pure and gentle, he may be rich, he may be powerful, he may be noble, he may be a prince, yet still he will be unhappy.

Now your character is built by your thoughts ; as you think, so shall you become. It is written in the *Chhāndogyaopanishad* : " Man is created by thoughts. As a man thinks, so he becomes." Thought is not only making you a body for Svarga, but also a character with which you will be reborn. If you but think nobly, you will be born with a noble character. If you think badly and basely, you will be born with a bad and base character. This is the law which cannot be changed.

The next thing is your desires ; by your desires is now being determined what sort of objects you shall have in your next life. If you desire money very much, you will get it in your next life ; if you desire power very much, you will get it in your next life. But take care how you choose. It is not always the choice of wealth and high position that gives happiness. Let me tell you the story of a man whose life is strange. The man was very poor. He became a contractor, and grew enormously rich.

Everything that he did succeeded. Every speculation he went into was successful. So that he heaped up rupees until he had lakhs of rupees, and crores of rupees, gathered together. He built a magnificent palace to live in, and he furnished it splendidly. But he does not live there, in spite of having such a magnificent home: he lives in a house in the village. He is unhappy, very miserable. His children are careless, his wife dead, all his relatives dislike him. He is a miserable man in the midst of such enormous wealth. He lives in a poor little cottage with one servant, suffering from a terrible disease. What had been his previous life? He had been a man always longing for money, money; the law of Karma was just, and gave him wealth. The character he built in the past life was truly miserable: he was very selfish, and always trying to get hold of money, and he did get it, but did not use it well. The result in this life was that he got money, but was miserable in the midst of it.

Then, as to the effect of actions. If in your life you make other people happy in this world, physically happy, then physical happiness will come to you in your next birth. If you spread prosperity about you, so that people around you are prosperous, you will have prosperity in your own life. If you make people happy, you must make some sacrifice yourself. Now let me suppose a very rich man gives a park to the public. This is a very good action, for it gives a great deal of physical happiness to the people; they can enjoy the air, they

can sit under the shadow of the trees. This physical happiness given will return to him as physical welfare; he will reap the physical good he has done, and the fruit of every benefit that people have received from him. All this comes back to him. But if he is to be morally happy, he must give it from an unselfish motive. He must give it from an unselfish desire to do good to the people. That unselfishness will come back to him in character, and will make him a happy man. A man must think of character as well as of actions, but he must not forget actions. If a man acts unjustly to others, injustice will come to him in another life by Kārmic law.

If power is not rightly used, if it oppresses and causes suffering, then the harsh ruler will in another life suffer oppression, and reap the fruit of the seed that he has sown. This is the law of Karma, which brings to every man according to his deeds, and according to his power is the measure of his responsibilities. Īshvara places men in high positions, and places them there to represent Him in the eyes of the people. It has always been taught in Hindūism that the prince is as God to his people, wielding the power of God. He stands there as the divine power, and is to be served as God, is to be served as Ruler. In exchange for that, he must give the people protection, justice; must guard the poor against the rich, and the weak from the oppression of the strong. Weakness must find in him a strong protector, for it is said in the *Mahābhārata* that the tears of the weak and

the oppressed destroy the power of the strong. It is the Divine Law. God is the one King of kings, the only Ruler of earthly rulers. He calls them to account for the injustice done by carelessness or by legal enactment, or by arbitrary will. Every power should remember the higher power to which it is accountable.

Such is the law of birth and death. Such is the circle through which the soul must pass on its way.

One thing remains to say of this wheel of birth and death from which nobody escapes. We are not always to tread this round, and not always to be reborn and not always to die. We grow wearied of it, and wish to escape. When this time comes, we ask the way to liberation. You remember the story of Nachikētas, who when his father was offering a sacrifice, asked him to whom he would give himself. The father replied : " To Death I will give thee." He went therefore to the house of Yama, the lord of Death, and stood there for three days and nights, without receiving hospitality, until Death returned, and found him waiting, in obedience to his father's promise to give him to Death. As amends for the lack of welcome, Death gave him three boons. Then Nachikētas first asked that his father might again be pleased with him. Another boon was that of the heavenly fire, and Death said that that fire should be known by him and called by his name. As the third boon the boy asked for the secret of Death. " Some say man is immortal ; others say he is not ; tell me, O Death, thy secret ; can man escape thy power ? " " Do not ask that," said Death. " Not that," said

Death again ; "ask any other boon and I will give it thee. I will give thee earthly wealth and all life's pleasures, but ask not the secret of Death." "Keep thou the joys of earth, keep thou the joys of heaven, keep thou the heavenly damsels, the heavenly dance and song. Instead of all these give me the one boon, the only boon I seek—how may man escape thy mouth?" said the boy. To such questioning Death was compelled to answer, and he told him how man might escape from the hands of Death. Man is bound by desires. The desires are born of the senses. These carry him from birth to birth, from death to death. He must overcome the senses. That is the first step to be taken, the first thing to do. As the senses bind him to birth and death alike, let him learn to control the senses and bring them under the domination of the mind. The body is like a chariot, the senses are the horses, the mind is the reins. Pure reason, the Buddhi, is the driver. The Self is above the driver and is in the chariot. The pure, the Buddhi, must drive the chariot and with the reins of the mind draw in the senses—the horses galloping after the objects of sense, and carrying the chariot with them. They must be guided along the right way. Let man control the mind by the pure reason, reducing it to peace, as he has reduced the senses. In every action let him control the senses and govern the mind. When once these steps are taken, the man will begin to see the Self by the tranquillity of the mind. Then let him give himself to Yoga. Let him meditate on the One, the Eternal, the Ātman within the

cavity of the heart. He who dwells in the cave of the heart, the seeker must fix his mind on him. On that eternal Man, the true Purusha, let him meditate within the city of the body. The mind in dwelling on the Eternal Ātman must be pure, must be fearless, must be steady; he must learn Gnyāna—the true wisdom—and Bhakti—the devotion that feels the unity of the Self. Thus may a man conquer Death. When all the desires of the heart are broken, then the mind becomes immortal. When the mind sees the supreme Soul, it escapes from the mouth of Death.

That is the secret told. That is the only secret of liberation that *can* be told. How shall we do this? How shall we learn it? There are still Gurus to teach us, and Death says: "Seek the great Gurus and attend." They are still living and are still teaching, and are seeking for people who are willing to learn. I speak to you as I know. They teach the way to the narrow Path that is still open, the Path which can be sought by the Divine Wisdom, the Ancient Wisdom, which they still teach to their pupils in the modern world by the great Theosophical Society. But the pupil must be ready to be a pupil, if the Guru is to be found. Then he may learn the greatest of Truths. But remember that the Self is not to be found by the sensual or by the weak; man cannot find him by words; he cannot find him by arguments. The Self reveals himself to him alone whom He chooses, and the choice of the Self is determined by the purity and unselfishness of the life.

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